

Civil Disorders

General Information

The United States has a long history of civil disorders and civil unrest. Unlike other large scale emergencies that bring communities together, civil disorders tend to be divisive. Since the 1960's, this division has primarily been along racial lines. These types of disorders have been classified as "communal" riots because they are direct battles between two or more ethnic groups. We have also seen "commodity riots" which stress the economic and political distribution of power among groups. Congressional Commissions in the 1960's attempted to categorize civil disorders based on size of crowds, the length of the violence, its intensity, and the level of force needed to restore order. With this information they established a ranking of major, serious and minor.

Washington state does not have an extensive history of civil disorders; of the events that have occurred here, none would be classified as major (based on the above criteria). The events that have occurred have been centered in the larger metropolitan areas of the state (Most civil disorders do occur in large cities.).

An example of civil disorder in Seattle was the small scale rioting after the 1992 Rodney King verdict. "The night of the verdict, small groups of people roamed the downtown streets smashing windows, lighting dumpster fires, and overturning cars. The next day, there was a rally at the Federal Building. Many people feared violence and avoided downtown. After the rally broke up, some groups moved around downtown as they did the night before but some went up to Capitol Hill where they set fires and attacked the West Precinct police headquarters." Another protest occurred in the University District; which although peaceful, managed to shut down Interstate 5 to traffic for some time.

The last decade has also seen increased rioting and looting occurring across the nation as a response to community sports teams winning championships. The multiple Championships won by the Chicago Bulls Championships in the early 1990's instigated riots each year. The 1991 Championship was followed by 100 arrests. The 1992 Championship (occurring approximately one month after the Rodney King verdict) was followed by 1000 arrests, hundreds of injuries (including 95 injured police officers), and many burned and looted buildings. These were not the first riots of this type, however. In 1990, 7 people were killed in Detroit after the Pistons won the Championship and one person was killed in 1984 after the Tigers won the World Series.

Vulnerability

Washington state is definitely vulnerable to civil disorders. The areas most highly vulnerable are the cities of Seattle, Tacoma and Olympia. But as other cities grow, they too will become more susceptible to civil disorders. Cities are vulnerable to disorders resulting from everything from a controversial arrest or verdict to rioting and looting in response to sports teams winning a championship.

Effects

Looting is the most common activity associated with civil disorders. Fire setting is also quite common and can quickly spread due to slow response times of overwhelmed fire departments. Transportation routes can become blocked making it difficult for non-rioters to leave the area

and difficult for emergency response personnel to arrive. Seattle's experience with civil disorders indicates violence focused on property rather than on people, but this pattern may or may not continue.

Conclusion

The ability to respond quickly is paramount in these situations. Therefore, emergency response agencies should plan and train for these types of events. They should also be able to predict the types of events that have the highest potential for getting out of control and be in a standby position. Los Angeles was caught off guard for the Rodney King verdict because no one suspected the verdict that was handed down. Communities should learn from the experiences in other jurisdictions.